

**TESTIMONY OF PRINCE GEORGE'S
COUNTY EXECUTIVE JACK JOHNSON
BEFORE THE HOUSE GOVERNMENT REFORM COMMITTEE**

**FIELD HEARING ON GANG ACTIVITIES
TAKOMA PARK, MARYLAND
SEPTEMBER 6, 2006**

Good Afternoon. I would like to thank Chairman Davis and the entire Committee for holding this important field hearing today in Takoma Park, Maryland. I would also like to thank Congressman Frank Wolf for his ongoing commitment to promoting community safety through gang reduction strategies in the region and across the United States. I would also like to acknowledge and commend Congressman Van Hollen for his tireless efforts to bring resources to Prince George's and Montgomery Counties for gang prevention, suppression, and intervention.

As you know Mr. Chairman and members of this committee, gangs across the United States have undermined and destabilized communities. Not only have they contributed to violent and other crime, they have also created an alternate social network for at-risk youth. Children don't suddenly wake up one morning and decide they want to be in a gang. Critical factors such as nuclear family decay, lack of strong role models, and lack of educational tools, limited job potential are among the most common factors making children susceptible to gang influence.

Gang reduction strategies have been employed across the country with varying degrees of success. When gangs such as the Crips and Bloods began getting attention around the United States in the 1970s and 80s, the primary focus of law enforcement was suppression. Resources in New

York, Los Angeles, Chicago and other large cities were primarily focused on breaking up gangs by infiltrating them and vigorously prosecuting members for crimes. That strategy, while effective to some extent, did not get to the root causes of why impressionable young people and teenagers were drawn to gangs. We know this because despite vast resources used for suppression, gangs continued to grow across America.

We recognized there was an increase in gang activity in our county and the region in the 1990s. When I served as State's Attorney we began seeing cases involving members of gangs and crews. They were not always members of MS-13, Vatos Locos or other well known groups, but often were smaller crews engaged in violent crimes. I distinctly remember some of the more violent cases that involved gang members. As a prosecutor my main emphasis was on the suppression side and vigorously prosecuting the individuals responsible, but I recognized that if we were going to fix the problem we had to get at the root causes.

The rise of gang activity in the past decade is not because gangs suddenly appeared in the region, they have been here a long time. Little, if anything, was being done on the prevention and intervention side. Consequently, their influence began to increase. Governments had failed to address why children entered gangs and or saw them as alternative family and social structures.

This was the primary reason that Montgomery County Executive Doug Duncan and I entered into an historic agreement in February 2004 to jointly address gang activities in both counties. We understood that gang activity

and youth violence was a regional problem. We knew we couldn't do it alone, and that federal resources were essential to reducing gang presence in our counties and the entire region. Our approach was different than other strategies previously used. While we would continue to vigorously pursue gang suppression, our primary emphasis was going to be on prevention and intervention with young people at-risk of joining gangs, and those eager to get out of them.

We began by creating a Joint Gang Prevention Task Force that was co-chaired by the police chiefs in each jurisdiction. Members of the group also included our lead people in Health and Human Services, our county health officers, representatives from social services, juvenile justice, educators, local activists, and others on the ground most familiar with youth and the powerful influences over them. It even included former gang members eager to prevent others from getting involved in that lifestyle. This holistic approach recognized that if we did not address gang issues at every level, our success would be limited.

The Task Force developed and released a comprehensive report in September 2004. It made 20 specific recommendations, and it concluded something we all know, prevention is the key to reducing gang influence. As we say the ounce of prevention can avoid the pound of the cure. We had to identify those children at risk and develop alternative programs with more productive outlets for our youth.

Prince George's County's efforts are not limited just to the activities of the Task Force and the programs developed by them. In addition to others that

will be discussed in a few minutes, we established several other programs to target the same at-risk population. We have established dozens of conflict resolution centers around the county to bring children and their families together to discuss serious issues and get children back on the right path and to open channels of communication between children and parents. We have developed the Men2Men mentoring program matching young males without a strong male parental figure with mentors. We even established a strong summer youth program designed to provide high school age students with gainful and productive use of their summer vacations and to give them tangible social and professional skills. Thousands of children have benefited from this program already.

Police Chief Melvin High and others will address today the specific programs we have undertaken in the joint effort, but I am here to say that our approach has been comprehensive and inclusive. It provides alternatives for young people potentially caught in the grips and pressures to join gangs. Through our Task Force, more resources have been dedicated to eradicating gang violence and influence than ever before.

We are very grateful to Congressman Wolf and Van Hollen for securing \$2 million in the FY 2006 budget to be used to implement Task Force recommendations. A detailed budget has been prepared on how these additional resources will be put to work as soon as the federal funds are released. They will help pay for additional police gang intervention staff, as well as social workers and pilot programs designed to turn youth away from the gang life.

In May of this year, Prince George's and Montgomery Counties jointly opened the Crossroads Youth Opportunity Center on the border between our counties. The center is designed to provide services for up to 200 young people offering job training assistance, language skill development, counseling and referral services and well as recreational programming. The facility is now open six days a week including evenings. Each of our critical county agencies is providing staff during work hours to better assist those in the community. This one-stop shop has never been attempted before, and the utilization thus far has told us that the model is working.

We must continue to do even more, but we have made a great start. We must continue to educate teachers and parents about recognizing gang colors and other signs that children may be engaged in gang activity. We must continue to fund more appropriate outlets and after-school activities to keep our children engaged mentally, physically, and emotionally. But one thing we do know is that children presented with dilemmas about joining gangs now have a place to turn to and people who can assist them. People wanting to get out of gangs have a place to come to and people who can work with them. Together we are addressing these issues with our sister county, and with other regional representatives, to ensure that the best practices are followed and that our resources will have the greatest impact.

I want to thank the Chairman and the Committee for taking time to hold this hearing in Maryland, and I look forward to working with you as we develop more programs to reduce gang activity. We will be seeking additional funds in the future and we know that Congressman Wolf is eager to provide

resources for this critical issue here, in our county, and throughout the United States.

Thank you.